

Music Education, 21st Century Skills, and the Common Core

Arts educators have unexpectedly been given a unique opportunity to establish the arts as a solid element in the K-12 curriculum. The skills, dispositions, and habits of mind deemed necessary for adults in the 21st century, an important initiative here in Wisconsin, coincide with those that flow from substantive arts education. The problem, of course, is the confusing and overlapping nature of the desired abilities, counterposed against the needs and expectations of music programs.

An understandable reaction to the dilemma of fitting it all into the instructional program is to throw up one's hands and return to the default position of direct instruction focused on producing the next performance. Instead, another possibility is to plan how one could accomplish and *enhance* the desired artistic outcomes by engaging the students in the process of developing and using these abilities. That is the focus of this column.

The 21st Century Skills

Briefly, these are grouped under three headings:

Learning and Innovation Skills

- creativity and innovation
- critical thinking and problem solving
- communication and collaboration

Information, Media, and Technology Skills

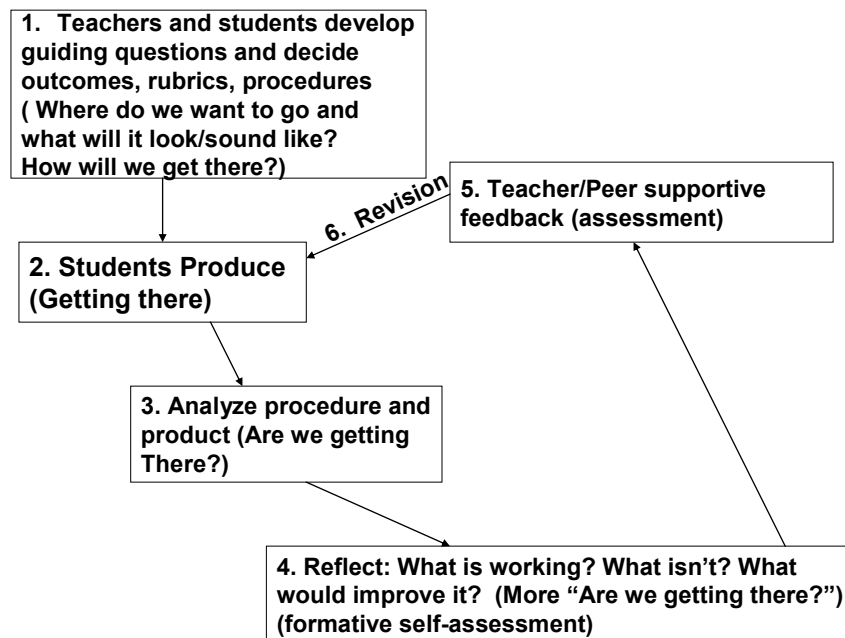
- information literacy
- media literacy
- information, communication, and technology literacy

Life and Career Skills

- flexibility and adaptability
- initiative and self-direction
- social and cross cultural skills
- productivity and accountability
- leadership and responsibility

Developing the Skills in the Classroom

Learning and Innovation Skills. Substantive arts education engages the students actively in their own learning, addressing the same issues and problems that confront professional artists and performers. This means a sequence of finding and defining the problem; developing and implementing a solution; analyzing one's work in progress, both process and product; reflecting on what is working, what isn't, and what would improve it; and then improving it.



This graphic of a teaching/learning process operationalizes the above problem-solving sequence for the classroom. By engaging the students directly in the problem-solving process, students routinely develop many of the stated skills. For instance, critical thinking, described as analyzing and evaluating ideas, processes, or products for quality and fit, is a basic skill used in several steps of the problem solving process above. Creative and innovative thinking has four main elements – flexibility, fluency, elaboration, and originality – and is the flip side of critical thinking. Creativity is necessary for critical thinking, and vice versa. Communication and collaboration are cultivated both in ensembles and small group projects and in peer assessments in which students must tactfully communicate judgments of each other’s work with discrimination and respect. Writing critiques of one’s own work in a clear and concise manner is another valuable strategy for developing communication skills. In a recent research project in MPS, an elementary classroom teacher noted that after her students had begun critiquing their own work in music class – what was working, what wasn’t, and what would improve it – they were beginning to write more clearly in her writing assignments.

Information, Media, and Technology Skills. In this increasingly information-rich culture, it is important that our students know how to access, evaluate, and use that information effectively. In music classes students can use the vast internet resources for researching topics relevant to their performance pieces and compositions; prepare presentations using technologies such as power point, animation, and film; and use video for documenting their achievements. Composition and accompanying software are used routinely in many music programs. Developing this new digital literacy through such learning tasks will enable students to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information. These are tools with which students can increase their ability to learn not only in the arts but throughout life.

Life and Career Skills. These are not engendered through direct instruction but instead spring from a positive, supportive classroom climate that encourages risk-taking; creative responses instead of the ‘single right answer;’ and the freedom – and responsibility – to assume a certain amount of control of one’s learning. Such a setting is the seedbed of those dispositions and habits of mind in this category. Flexibility, adaptability, and initiative/self-direction flourish in environments in which the chase for grades and dread of tests are absent. When students are actively involved in developing the criteria and rubrics, making artistic decisions, and formatively assessing their work, as in the model above, the question, ‘What grade did you give me?’ does not occur.

The same is true for productivity, accountability, leadership, and responsibility. In this setting students are intrinsically motivated to learn. And the social skills are closely connected with these dispositions and habits of mind. When students are focused on learning instead of grades they are able to defer short-term goals (grades) for long-term gain (mastery), and when they help each other and take responsibility for their actions, they function at a higher level.

Recap

Although these goals may seem daunting, they are achievable through the problem-solving process described above. When students take part in step one of the above graphic, they are developing important higher-order thinking skills, such as the tools of creativity – fluency, flexibility, elaboration, and originality – as well as communication and the give and take of collaboration and social skills. Use of the information and technology skills are limited only by the imagination of the teacher and students. When students address step three, four, five, and six, they are developing and using not only creative/critical thinking skills but also the whole gamut of the Life and Career Skills.

Developing these skills is not an ‘add-on’ to music education but an important strategy for enhancing students’ achievement in music. Further, they are most readily achieved through the arts. A natural result of a positive emotional response is enhanced valuing of the entity, event, or activity that caused the response. Because music and the other arts occasion such a response in students, these skills are adopted, developed, and assimilated to a greater degree than in those areas of the curriculum without this emotional aspect.

In developing these skills through this process, teachers should help students take the metacognitive leap and realize that the skills are portable to other areas of the curriculum and to life beyond school. Teachers can familiarize students with these skills by modeling them – “thinking aloud” in step one above and naming the skills used. A natural progression from that is occasionally having students identify and discuss the thinking skills they used in answering the three questions (Where are we going, how will we get there, are we getting there?). By using and naming them, students will over time develop conscious control of an arsenal of these strategies, which will prepare them to contribute to and function in a just and democratic society and in the global workplace.